

## *The Pearl, the Son and the Servants, in Abraham Abulafia's Parable*

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### *1. Abraham Abulafia's Version of the Parable in Its Context*

There is scarcely one single passage in the numerous writings of the founder of ecstatic Kabbalah Rabbi Abraham Abulafia [1240- c. 1291]<sup>1</sup> that received an attention equal to that of the parable of the son and the pearl. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the parable has been dealt with by a variety of scholars, each for his/her different reasons, though no sustained analysis of the context and the author's intention is available.<sup>2</sup> This parallel to the more famous parable of the three

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<sup>1</sup> On this Kabbalist, whose views will be the focus of our discussions below see the more general exposition of Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken Books, New York, 1960), pp. 119-155, and the monographs M. Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, tr. J. Chipman, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1988), idem, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, tr. M. Kallus, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1989), idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (SUNY Press, Albany, 1988), idem, *Natan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar, Le Porte della Giustizia*, a Cura di Moshe Idel, tr. Maurizio Motolesse, (Adelphi, Milano, 2001), E.R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Cherub Press, Los Angeles, 2000), Harvey J. Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder, Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans, and Joachimism*, (SUNY Press, Albany 2007), and Robert J. Sagerman, *The Serpent Kills or the Serpents Give Life: The Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia's Response to Christianity*, (Brill, Leiden 2011). Sustained discussions on Abulafia are available also in chapters of many of my other books, in particular *Messianic Mystics*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1998), pp. 58-100, *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280-1510, a Survey* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2010), pp. 30-88, 297-298, or *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism*, (Continuum, London, New York, 2008), pp. 276-376 as well as in studies referred in the footnotes 2, 3, 22, 31, 44, 49, 57, 62, 66, 69, 91, 96, below.

<sup>2</sup> The story is found already Muslim sources. See Louis Massignon, "La legende de *Tribus Impostoribus* et ses origines Islamiques," in his *Opera Minora*, (Dar al-Maaref, Beyrut, 1963), I pp. 82-85 and Barbara Roggema, Marcel Poorthuis, Pim Valkenberg, *The three rings: textual studies in the historical dialogue of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, (Peeters, Leuven, 2005), in particular pp. 279-281 and Iris Shagrir, "The Parable of the Three Rings: a revision of its history," *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 23 (1997), pp. 163-177, especially pp. 171-172. For Abulafia's special version see Moritz Steinschneider, *Hebraeische Bibliographie*, IV (1861), p. 78 note 7, ibidem, vol. XII, p. 21, Abraham Berger, "The Messianic Self-Consciousness of Abraham Abulafia – A Tentative Evaluation," *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo Wittmayer Baron* (New York, 1959), pp. 59-60 note 19, Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 48-50, idem, *Ben*, pp. 370-371 n. 213, Hames, ibidem, pp. 66-69, Elliot R. Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond, Law & Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006), pp. 60-61, 64-67, idem, "Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia and the Prophetic Kabbalah," in ed. F. E. Greenspan, *Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah: New Insights and Scholarship* (New York University Press, New York, 2011), p. 72, idem, "Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body, Abraham Abulafia's

sons and three rings appears in one of the earliest books he wrote in the most productive decade when he stayed in Messina, between circa 1281-1291, entitled *'Or ha-Sekhel*, namely *The Light of the Intellect*, which should be dated sometimes around 1282-1283.<sup>3</sup> Below I shall concentrate solely on Abulafia's version and his interpretations of this passage, leaving aside other versions in the Jewish tradition dealing with the three rings parable.

Most of the scholars that dealt with Abulafia's version were concerned with the similarities and differences between his parable and Boccaccio's story in the *Decameron*, and much less with the specific conceptual framework in which the parable has been embedded, and the framework has not been analyzed in detail, and thus also the message that Abulafia wanted to convey by resorting to a parable. The resort to a parable is an unusual literary use in his many writings. Moreover, as the Kabbalist pointed out explicitly in the context of the parable, there is an esoteric dimension of matters that he addresses, and this vital issue has not been put in relief in the interpretations I am acquainted with. Let me therefore translate the salient context of the parable and the parable itself, and discuss them, in order to make sense of the special version of the parable, as intended by the Kabbalist.

The parable is part of a discussion intended to demonstrate the superiority of Hebrew. However given the fact that in all languages the function of transmission of the message works, Abulafia claims that we may discern which the best of the languages is by checking the nature of the nation that uses a certain language:

“[a][1] It is known that a nation that possesses Torah and commandments, laws and regulations that are most righteous than another [nation] it is more respected to that that emanates on all.<sup>4</sup> And as much as the nation moved away from the universal religion [*ha-dat ha-kehalit*] that was hinted at, it is more remote from that which is the first cause for the influence of the religion, which

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Polemic with Christianity,” in eds. D. Engel, L. H. Shiffman, E.R. Wolfson, *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan*, (Leiden, Brill, 2012), pp. 204-205, Sagerman, *ibidem*, p. 58 note 98, Kaufmann Kohler, *Jewish Theology Systematically and Historically Considered*, (MacMillan, New York, 1918), p. 434, Avishai Margalit, “The Ring, On Religious Pluralism,” in ed., David Heyd, *Tolerance, An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996), p. 148, See also below note 83.

<sup>3</sup> M. Idel, *Abraham Abulafia's Works and Doctrine* (Ph. D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1976), pp. 24-25 (Hebrew) and on its influence see *ibidem*, pp. 35-36, and *idem*, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 63-71.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps God or the cosmic agent Intellect.

is the divine influx that moves the universal speech [*ha-dibbur ha-kelali*]<sup>5,6</sup> [2] It is known among the nations that our nation is the nation that received first the Torah from the mouth of the Dynamis, and there is no nation that denies it. And what is acknowledged by everyone and became known in public, does not need a further proof. If so, that which originates from the source of all is superior to its counterparts and its language is superior to all the languages. And the witness is that it is in the language of this special nation that He spoke to it all He spoke, and in its writing [namely alphabet] He commanded to write all that he will write. Furthermore what He said was written by Him on the two tablets of stone, either if this is according to the plain sense alone or it should be understood on both the exoteric and esoteric senses. And both senses are true or one of them, behold it has been written in the Holy Language and the tradition persists until now. [3] If one will say: "It was true but see the nation is not worthwhile of this exalted degree and He changed it for another nation, and He changed its laws and commandments, and He came and diminished them and changed their writing," indeed by necessity he says this, he himself confesses its degree, and the degree of its language and the degree of its writing. After he concedes the principal matter come the question him: because the above-mentioned three degrees are today absent from it [or us]. And if we shall not question him on the sensible deficiency since we would deny the obvious, we could not ascertain the intellectual since the sensible precedes the intellectual by nature, despite the fact that the intellectual precedes the sensible in degree... But we shall acknowledge the truth that nowadays the three degrees are absent from us though not by the way of the exchange of one by another.

[b] Rather the matter resembles someone<sup>7</sup> who had a beautiful pearl which he wanted to bequeath to his son. While he was instructing his son in matters of wealth so that the son will recognize the virtue of the pearl and would value it

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<sup>5</sup> Some lines beforehand Abulafia spoke about the divine influx that moves all the languages, plausibly a parallel to the universal speech. Compare also to what Abulafia wrote in *Ve-Zot li- Yhudah*, printed in *Ginzei Hokhmat ha-Qabbalah*, ed. Adolph Jellinek, (Leipzig, 1853), p. 27: "The Torah, as well as all speeches, are as a hyle for thought [*mahashavah*]." Here the thought is the human thought. It should be pointed out that an oblivion of language is considered by Abulafia a regress into animality, including in this category also Jews. See two texts adduced in my *Kabbalah in Italy*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>6</sup> Paragraph [a1], has not been translated in the various accounts of the parable, and only rarely mentioned *en passant*, without a proper analysis of its contribution for the understanding of the parable. See below note 45.

<sup>7</sup> I do not know why Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, p. 60, and "Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body," p. 204, assumes that Abulafia's parable speaks about a king, and about the son as a prince. Nothing in the Hebrew text points in this direction.

in the same way as it is in the eyes of the father, the son came and angered the father. What did the father do? He did not want to give the pearl to the another person less the son will lose his inheritance if he will repent and please his father, but he cast the pearl in a pit and he said "If my son does not repent I do not want him to inherit it but if he repents I do not want that he should lose it. And as long as he does not repent it will be stored in the pit, and when he will repent I shall immediately take it out of the pit and give it to him." As long as he did not repent the servants<sup>8</sup> of the father came each and every day and aggrieved him, and each of them was boasting that his master gave him the pearl. But the son did not pay attention to them, because he had no intelligence [*hasar da'at*]. After a while they so aggrieved him that he repented, and the father forgave him and brought the pearl out of the pit and gave it to him. The servants had to exert themselves for grieves they grieved him and offer many words of appeasement.

[c] This has happened to us in the case of those who say that God has taken them in exchange for us, for all the time that we do not make peace with God, because we have sinned, we have no mouth to answer them. However, when we shall repent, and He will return our captivity, those who shame us now will be ashamed when they see that God has returned our captivity, they will see that their thought and imagination [were wrong] and that we have been afflicted for our sins, but all have been absolved. As of today we have not attained that exalted degree to which we expect to rise at any time. For this reason the dispute continues about who is the beloved of God and who has the treasure and the truth, we or our enemies. This will persist until the decider [*ha-makhri'a*]<sup>9</sup> will come and take the pearl out of the pit and give it to His chosen, to us or to them. Then the absolute truth will become perfectly clear and the precious treasure will become radiant and return to its rightful owners, those worthy to inherit it, those who are called the sons of God. [Then] jealousy and strife, disputation and hatred will cease, and imaginary thoughts will be obliterated from the hearts. Then, each and every man will consider each and every members of

<sup>8</sup> The Hebrew is *'eved*, which can be translated also as slave.

<sup>9</sup> Most plausibly a reference to the prophet Elijah, that was often understood in Jewish sources as deciding issues that cannot be resolved by the ordinary type of human decision and coming before the Messiah as a harbinger. See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 57 note 22. Since Elijah as a human person and a harbinger of the Messiah does not play a role in Abulafia's eschatology, I assume that the decider here is the cosmic Agent Intellect, which was associated to this intellect in *Sitrei Torah*. See Idel, *Ben*, pp. 279-282, 289. Indeed, *Makhri'a* is related to Metatron, in *'Or ha-Sekhel*, ed. Gross, p. 82. On the other hand, the term *Makhri'a*, stands for the intellect within man, in a passage in *'Or ha-Sekhel*, p. 41. Interestingly enough, the Hebrew form of Elijah, *'Eliyahu*, contains the consonants *'hwy*, plus the letter l.

the species as if it is his fellow and his fellow is himself, just as a man can see every one of his limbs, as if it is the other and every part of them are for him everything, “And that many will go about and knowledge will increase.”<sup>10</sup> No one will instruct his fellow man and say “Know God!” for all shall know the name<sup>11</sup> from the greatest to the smallest, “for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God, as the water that covers the sea.”<sup>12</sup> Since the matter is so, all agree that since then the chosen language is the holy language. Therefore I will make known that which was made known to the prophets concerning the secret of the pronounced name, which is not known to any of the members of the human species.”<sup>13</sup>

## *2. A Commentary on the Parable's Contexts*

The starting point of the translated passage [a1] makes the connection between the universal speech and the universal religion, which means that the best of the languages, the general speech, is related to the best of religions, the universal one. In order to decide what the best of the languages is, which the main topic of the chapter is, someone has to watch the structure of a certain nation. These two topics are therefore related to each other, though a third topic, the script is not mentioned in this specific context, though it will be mentioned together with them later on in the discussions.

I would like to distinguish first between three different types of narrative which are found in my opinion in the above passage: the parabolic one as found in paragraph [b]; then the historical one, found in both [a] and [c], which is an interpretation of the parable that I would like to describe also as horizontal, and finally a third one, which is only hinted at when Abulafia refers in [a2] to the esoteric meaning of some concepts he uses, but also implied in other instances, which I would like to describe as psychological, transhistorical allegory, which is vertical. Needless to say this third level is the most important one for Abulafia, who subscribed to a political type of esotericism, following the lead of two books he knew, written by Maimonides and Al-Farabi, and probably

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<sup>10</sup> Daniel 12:4.

<sup>11</sup> Or God. The assumption is that the knowledge of God will depend then not on human instruction but on a direct contact with divinity.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 11:9.

<sup>13</sup> Ms. Vatican 233, fols. 37b-39b, printed from different manuscripts by A. Gross (Jerusalem, 2001), pp. 33-36, and ed. M. Safrin, (Jerusalem, 1999), pp. 41-44, and more recently edited and translated in English by A. Solomon, A. Shohom, Sh. Shatil, *Ohr ha-Sechel, the Light of the Intellect*, (Providence University, 2008), pp. 47-50, 202-204.

also Averroes. Given the concentration on the historical dimensions of some of the scholars, on the parallels of the parable and the assumption that the ultimate significance of the passage is the historical date of the Jewish people, little has been done in order to put in relief the existence and the significance of the third level of narrative. It should be also pointed out that there is no reason to assume that it is possible to fit all the three narratives in all their details, an issue well known in interpretations of parables.

Let me highlight from the very beginning that the central theme of the long quote is a concept that I am not aware of its existence in Jewish writings in general: the universal religion. This religion is described as part of the past, a conclusion based on the use of the past tense of the verb “moved away”, some form of ideal criterion, that every other religion is judged in comparison to it. Though the phrase does not recur in Abulafia’s writings anywhere else, we may be able to guess its meaning from the context in paragraph [a] and the content of [c]. In section [a] this concept is parallel to the universal speech since both the universal religion and the universal speech are emanated from the divine influx. We may assume that the divine influx is an intellectual influx, which is transformed in both speech and religion, as part of the phenomenon of revelation. I see this emphasis on universality as related to intellectuality. The opening remarks about a Torah and regulations can be understood either as identical to the universal religion or as different, each reading constituting a different understanding. The former can be described as a more universalistic vision of “the Torah”, the latter as a more particularistic one, “a Torah”. I believe that the second interpretation is the more plausible one, provided the rather bizarre formulation: “a Torah”. The accuracy of the law constitutes the closeness or distance from the divine source. I shall try to reinforce this reading later on.

The three degrees or values mentioned in [a] are: Torah, the Hebrew language, and the Hebrew script, namely the form of the Hebrew letters. Needless to say that these virtues are related to each other, as it has been mentioned above, as they deal with some form of linguistic articulations, and they are often described in opposition to the languages and the religions of the gentiles, as the opposition between intellect and imagination.<sup>14</sup> It seems, however, that only the second one is explicitly described in the last sentence as being continuously in possession of the nation, while the all the three may have been lost, as we may infer from the closing sentence of [a2]. I see no way to resolve this

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<sup>14</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, p. 19, and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 58-59. On the three virtues see *’Otzar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, ed. Gross, (Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 183, 188.

contradiction but the assumption that there is an esoteric teaching, that assumes that even Hebrew has been forgotten, as he expressly mentions elsewhere in the same book.<sup>15</sup> In general, the basic assumption of the consonance between the superior society formed by a religion, and the language spoken by it, is logically difficult from the historical point of view, if someone tried to use this nexus in order to prove the superiority of Hebrew, in the conditions of the exile, as Abulafia recognizes explicitly. In general, it may be assumed that the three gifts represent some form of lower modification of the intellectual, which constitute an historical religion, while the intellectual level is hidden.

Let me emphasize that the necessity to assume an esoteric reading is not my imposition but it has been explicitly referred by Abulafia himself in [a2]. In a manner reminiscent of the parable's son that does not receive the instruction, we read in his commentary on the secrets of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* about an early "turned away" from an earlier tradition:

"And all this [the account of the chariot] you will know from the letters. No other nation has a tradition such as this, and even our own nation is far from it, having quickly moved away from the path. Therefore our exile continues."<sup>16</sup>

Here exile is explicitly related to oblivion of a tradition related to letters, reiterating the nexus between society and language, we have mentioned above. This turn away is reminiscent of the moving away in the passage from *'Or ha-Sekhel*, translated above, and in both cases exactly the same Hebrew verb has been used *nitrahaqah*.

It should be mentioned that the context of the parable, has a very significant, though unnoticed, parallel in a lengthy discussion found in a latter book, *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, where the parable however is not mentioned at all.<sup>17</sup> Given the limited framework of the present study, I postpone the more detailed analysis of the significance of the parallel for understanding Abulafia's view of religions and Judaism to another occasion.

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<sup>15</sup> See Idel, *ibidem*, p. 23, as well as other sources adduced *ibid.*, pp. 23-24. In *'Or ha-Sekhel*, on the other hand, he states that the universal language is known even today, but it is incomprehensible to the present speakers. See Idel, *ibidem*, p. 20. In my opinion, Abulafia issued contradicting views, as part of his political esotericism a major methodological problem that has not drawn the sufficient attention in scholarship. See *'Or ha-Sekhel*, ed. Gross, pp. 70-71, 107, *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, ed. Gross, pp. 121, 122-123, and below notes 22 and 58. I hope to deal with this issue in a separate study. On Abulafia's assumption that he was persecuted already at the beginning of his career see below beside note 96.

<sup>16</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 162a, ed. A. Gross, (Jerusalem, 2002), p.158, Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, p. 184 note 205 and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1:10, ed. Gross, pp. 185-193.

It should be mentioned that Abulafia does not refer to any name in the historical narrative, though hints to Moses or Elijah can be discerned. Neither is he referring explicitly to either Christianity or Islam.<sup>18</sup> Abulafia chose also not to mention any specific historical event, like the sin of the Golden calf that is probably hinted at, as pointed out by Hames, in the translated passage.<sup>19</sup> This reluctance may be part of an attempt to deemphasize the eschatological narrative in its popular version that gravitates around personalities and external events.

### 3. *The Secret of the Tablets of Stone.*

In [a2] there is quite an unusual statement regarding the tablets of stone, whose description is presented as possibly possessing also an esoteric meaning: “the two tablets of stone, either if this is according to the plain sense alone or it should be understood on both the exoteric and esoteric senses. And both senses are true or one of them.” The possibility that only one of the two meanings is correct is a rather surprising one in the medieval literature, but not so much in this specific case since in Abulafia’s axiology the esoteric meaning is conceived of as being superior. This means that the plain sense, namely of God’s writing with his finger on the tablets of stone the letters of the Ten Commandments is quite unimaginable in Abulafia’s Maimonidean theology, which describes God as a separated intellect, and such a description constitutes a great theological quandary. This leaves us with the plausible possibility that Abulafia attributes solely an esoteric sense to the biblical episode, perhaps the only possible one from the theological point of view, especially when the plain sense is problematic, as we learn from another passage of Abulafia’s:

“the [biblical] verse bears two topics *together*, and even supports the plain sense, when its first words will be brought together with the last words, more than the hidden, when the hidden topic will be understood by the perfect intellect,<sup>20</sup> [that is] demonstrative and Kabbalist-religious, we should not care about the connections between the words on the plain sense. Those [connections] came only in order to

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<sup>18</sup> Compare, however, Wolfson, “Textual Flesh, Incarnation, and the Imaginal Body,” p. 204. However, in the parallel discussion in *’Otzar ’Eden Ganuz*, 1:9, ed. Gross, p. 183, the names of the three founder of the three monotheistic religions are mentioned explicitly.

<sup>19</sup> *Like the Angels on Jacob’s Ladder*, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup> Perfect intellect is important for Abulafia since he was concerned with removing the imaginative power, as we shall see below.



[extremely] deepen the secrecy<sup>21</sup> that emerges out of it and to cover the hidden, from the multitude of the sages of the plain sense...the hidden are divine topics and the plain sense are human topics.”<sup>22</sup>

What would be the esoteric meaning of the biblical verse on the finger of God and the tablets? Discussing the divine names that may change the order of nature, Abulafia describes them as

“divine [‘*Elohyim*] [and they] change nature [*Teva*’], [since they] are the throne [*ha-Kisse*] and this is the secret of [the verse]<sup>23</sup> It is the Finger of God [‘*Etzba*’ ‘*Elohim*’] namely the finger changes nature by the virtue of the mentioned ‘*Elohim*, which is the attribute of judgment.”<sup>24</sup>

The ecstatic Kabbalist concisely formulates his conclusion in a later work, *Sefer ha-Hesheq*:

“The tables [of the Law] are a homonym for natural internal issues, since according to the *A”T Ba”SH* device tables [*LHT*, according to the biblical elliptic spelling] are tantamount to [the consonants of] *Kisse*’ [throne] which is [in gematria] *Teva*’ [Nature] and for the external issues which are the tables of stones.”<sup>25</sup>

According to this passage the tablets stand for the inner, spiritual aspects of man. The tablets of the heart, which are, according to Abulafia, the intellectual and imaginative faculties<sup>26</sup> designated as nature, and for the external objects. Since the two key-concepts referred to in the passage from *Sefer Get ha-Shemot*, Nature and Throne, occur also in the passage from *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, it

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<sup>21</sup> Or the hiding: *lehaflig ha-hester*.

<sup>22</sup> *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, Ms. Munich 408, fol. 9b, ed. A. Gross (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 12. On the secrets of the tablets see ‘*Otzar ‘Eden Ganuz*, 1:3, ed. Gross, p. 192. On the tension between the plain and the esoteric senses of the Hebrew Bible, to the extent that in some cases the latter is conceived of as contradicting or deconstructing the former, according to some of Abulafia’s views see M. Idel, “On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia,” in eds. B. Brown, M. Lorberbaum, A. Rosnak, Y. Z. Stern, *Religion and Politics in Jewish Thought, Essays in Honor of Aviezer Ravitzky*, (The Israel Democracy Institute, Merkaz Z. Shazar, Jerusalem, 2012), I, pp. 387-409 (Hebrew), and see also Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 175. See also below note 90.

<sup>23</sup> Exodus 31:18.

<sup>24</sup> Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1682, fol. 101b. On this work of Abulafia’s see Idel, *Abraham Abulafia’s Works and Doctrines*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>25</sup> Ms. New York, JTS 1801 fol. 19b-20a. See also *ibid.*, fol. 8b. More on some of these issues see M. Idel, “*Deus sive Natura*, The Metamorphosis of a Dictum from Maimonides to Spinoza,” *Maimonides and the Sciences*, eds. S. Cohen and H. Levine, (Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 2000), pp. 87-110.

<sup>26</sup> *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics*, pp. 16, 42-46.

seems reasonable to apply the homonymy from one discussion to another, and articulate Abulafia's secret as to the meaning of the material entities in the Bible as pointing to inner, namely to the spiritual nature. What we learn from these passages as to the meaning of [a2], is that Abulafia interpreted the biblical episode as dealing esoterically with an inner experience, which means that the tablets of the heart are conceived to be the esoteric meaning of the biblical tablets of stones. This small exercise hints at a direction that should be followed also insofar as other aspects of the discussions in the passage from *'Or ha-Sekhel*, which means that the ultimate meaning, which is esoteric, is dealing with the inner experience of the intellect.

Indeed, according to Abulafia, the Agent Intellect is, most probably, the primordial speech [*dibbur qadmon*], the source of all speech that constitutes the prime-matter of the revelation.<sup>27</sup> According to several of his texts,<sup>28</sup> this separate intellect is the source of all the sciences of the world, and of human knowledge as well, but it is depicted at the same time in many of his writings as the source of the seventy languages, *Shivi'im Leshonot*, a phrase which is identical, according to *gematria* calculations, to the concept of the combination of letters: *Tzeruf ha-'Otiyyot*, since both Hebrew phrases total the number 1214.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, again using the *gematria*, Abulafia calculates that the consonants of Agent Intellect, in Hebrew *Sekhel ha-Po'el*, is numerically identical to the noun *Yisra'el*, since both phrases equal 541. The noun *Yisra'el* is interpreted as being composed of *YeSh* = 310, which means "there are" and *Ra'l*, the 231 combinations of two letters presented in some versions of *Sefer Yetzirah*.<sup>30</sup>

Thus the source of the forms in this world is envisioned to be identical to all the combinations of two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. In Abulafia's mystical system, the combinations of letters are a major component in attaining mystical experience which is tantamount in many instances to union with the Agent Intellect. The lower linguistic activity unifies, therefore, the human and the supernal spiritual which is conceived of in linguistic terms too. It should be pointed out that the above speculation includes also a spiritualization of the term *Yisra'el*, an issue to which we shall revert below.

<sup>27</sup> See Abulafia, *Ve-Zot li-Yhudah*, ed. A. Jellinek, *Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik*, (Leipzig, 1853), I, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 108, 142-143.

<sup>29</sup> See Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic of the Kabbala," *Diogenes* vol. 80 (1972), pp. 187-192; Idel, *ibidem*, pp. 8-11, 38-41, 108-109.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., *Sefer Sitrei Torah*, Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 125a. See also Scholem, *ibidem*, pp. 187-188.

#### 4. *The Natures of the Son*

The scholars dealing with the parable interpreted the son as an allegory for the nation mentioned in [a] and in [c], namely the historical people of Israel. This is indubitably true. This means that the Torah in its absolute intellectual meaning was not delivered to the nation in the past and for sure not found in its possession in the present, though this nation, namely the genetic Jews, may have some form of priority to receive it in the future. This is indeed a radical statement, which has many ramifications for a proper understanding Abulafia's approach to religion and Judaism. Such a reading would constitute the second type of narrative, namely the historical explanation of the plain sense of the parable. There is nothing esoteric here, nothing especially spiritual either, but a rather particularistic understanding of religion gravitating around the genetic Jews.

However, in my opinion, this understanding, though correct, is not the Kabbalist's final message that he wanted to transmit by resorting to this parable. Such a national-historical reading takes the intention of Abulafia solely to a concrete, plain sense, as if what was religiously most important for him is what happened in history to a large group of people, genetically belonging to a certain collective category, considered to be the sons of God, or the collective son of God. Such an assumption would reduce Abulafia's thought to a version of the biblical or Rabbinic understanding of Judaism.

However, following Maimonides's Neo-Aristotelianism, Abulafia shifted the importance of resemblance between son and father from the original corporeal isomorphism, which is the thrust of the discussions in the biblical and rabbinic traditions regarding the image mentioned in Gen. 1.27, to a spiritual resemblance, or contiguity between the supernal world conceived of as an intellectual realm, and the perfect man when he actualizes his passive intellect.<sup>31</sup> Unlike earlier forms of morpho-nominalism, namely the assumption that the son resembles his father physically, and also bearing his name,<sup>32</sup> Abulafia was interested in what I propose to call a nous-nominalism, namely the assumption that true Israel and the divine sphere share not only a common name but also a common nature, the intellectual one, which means an intellectual or spiritualized understanding of Israel, as seen also above. Indeed, in his commentary on

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<sup>31</sup> *Ben*, p. 287. See also M. Idel, "Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist "Son of God" on Jesus and Christianity," ed. Neta Stahl, *Jesus Among the Jews, Representation and Thought*, (Routledge, London, New York, 2012), pp. 70-71.

<sup>32</sup> See *Ben*, pp. 18-22.

the alleged secrets of Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* entitled *Sitrei Torah*, he deals with three different meanings of the term son, and this distinction deserves some more detailed discussion. Abulafia assumed there that the Hebrew term *Ben* is one of the thirty-six secrets that he claimed he received as found in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Abulafia distinguishes in the Hebrew Bible between three different categories of sons: the genetic, the metaphorical-intellectual ones, and all the others.<sup>33</sup> He claims that all the occurrences of the term *Ben* in the *Guide of the Perplexed* should be understood as pointing to some form of allegorical meaning, as the phrase "the sons of the prophets" does not refer to the biological relationship between father and son, but to someone who is the disciple of another person. Also the occurrence of the expressions "The Name of Four letters" in Hebrew *Shem ben 'Arba' 'Otioyyot*, should be understood according to this Kabbalist in a metaphorical manner. Then, he claims, that any causatum, or influx, is designated as son, like in the biblical expression *Benei ha-'Elohim*, that means some form of angels.

After establishing the metaphorical name nature of the Maimonidean discussions, he returns to the Bible and asserts that one should not apply this principle of metaphorical reading to all the occurrences of the term *Ben*, since this will generate some form of heresy. However, he claims, one should not assume that all the occurrences of the term *Ben* in the Bible are dealing with biological sons, since the intellect understands that they not eternal. Especially important for our discussion is the metaphorical reading that he proposes to the biblical phrase "My firstborn Israel" which should be interpreted against its plain sense, and read metaphorically. This means that according to an esoteric reading of the Hebrew Bible it is not a person that is intended but the intellect when it is actualized, as it is the case of Seth, who was described as being born in the image and likeness of God. Abulafia dislocates the national type of sonship as one final definition of Judaism, and supplements it by an intellectual one, conceived to be more sublime, which means that he interprets one of the most cherished national value, the national sonship, as pointing in fact to an intellectual relationship between God as intellect, and another, derived human intellect. By doing so he highlights another value, as more important than the national or genetic belonging. Instead of the centrality of the collective, Abulafia installs the priority of the individual's intellect.

Who are those intellectual sons? According to another commentary on the

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<sup>33</sup> *Sitrei Torah*, ed. Gross, pp. 22-26, Ms. Munich 341, fol. 160b. I touched the content of this passage briefly in *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 54.

secrets of the *Guide*, they are the prophets. He draws this conclusion by resorting to an exegetical techniques characteristic of his Kabbalah on the ground of the permutations of the consonants of the word *Mitnabbe'im* – which means ‘they prophesy’ – which generate the words *'Atem Banim*, ‘you are the sons’, an expression found in Deut. 14.1, one of the most important proof-texts for the divine sonship of the people of Israel.<sup>34</sup> It is the act of intellection that is crucial for prophecy rather than concrete religious deeds, namely the commandments that count for the attainment of ultimate perfection, according to this thinker. This subversive axiology, that prefers the spiritual rather than the corporeal, represents a deep tendency in Abulafia's thought also insofar as many other topics are concerned. The proof for the need of such a spiritual understanding of the son is his description as lacking knowledge, and the repentance is most probably related to his acquiring knowledge.<sup>35</sup> Also the gist of paragraph [c] deals with the spread of knowledge on the eschaton.

In any case, at least in one instance Abulafia explicitly rejected the view that the people of Israel are to be understood solely as a corporate personality are a Son of God in a genetic sense, as he points out above, in the triple categorization of sonship in his *Sitrei Torah*.<sup>36</sup>

### *5. The Messianic Valences in Abulafia's Interpretation of the Parable*

The future aspect of the parable speaks about the son's repentance, namely his becoming clever, and his inheriting the pearl. This parabolic part is understood on the historical or national level as the redemption of the Jews and the admission of all the other nations of their superiority. In another form it is part of the parable of the three rings also in other versions. This reading is no doubt part of a popular, exoteric form of messianism, well-known in the Middle Ages and used also by Abulafia in his writings on the rhetoric level. However, I assume the existence of an additional level, an esoteric one, which entails another form of redemption. Such a reading will parallel the interpretation of the son as an intellect, namely the concept of sonship in a non-genetic sense.

Let me first adduce a text that stems from Abulafia's commentary to one of his own “prophetic books” written in the same period when he wrote *Sefer 'Or*

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<sup>34</sup> *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, ed. Gross, p. 16, and see Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 109-110.

<sup>35</sup> For repentance interpreted in strong intellectual terms see Abulafia, *Sitrei Torah*, ed. Gross, p. 38. See also the text translated by Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 127.

<sup>36</sup> For Abulafia as a son see below, at the end of this article.

*ha-Sekhel* in the same town. The Kabbalist, who believed that he is a messiah, distinguishes between three different meanings of this term:

“The term *Mashiyah* is equivocal, [designating] three [different] matters; [a] first and foremost the true Agent Intellect is called the Messiah...[b] and the man who will forcibly bring us out of the exile from under the rule of the nations due to his contact with the Agent Intellect – he will [also] be called Messiah. [c] And the material human Intellect is called Messiah. This is the hylic<sup>37</sup> intellect that is the redeemer and has influence over the soul and all elevated spiritual powers. It can save the soul from the rule of the material kings and their people and their powers, the lowly bodily desires. It is a commandment and an obligation to reveal this matter to every wise man of the wise ones of Israel in order that he may be saved because there are many things that oppose the opinions of the multitude of the Rabbis, even more so differ from the views of the vulgus.”<sup>38</sup>

Thus, three meanings of the term *Mashiyah* are advocated: [a] the cosmic intellect, that operates all the time and informs all the processes of intellection in this world, which are conceived of as a salvific processes from the point of view of the Neo-Aristotelian theories in the Middle Ages. This global messiah [a] saves therefore all the people who intelligize, be they genetic Jews or not. According to the Kabbalist also the human particular intellect is the messiah, but now of the individual [c], and here again a universal approach may be safely discerned, since the intellect is not simply attributable to Jews. Both senses of messiah, [a] and [c] are, however, not apocalyptic figures and no catastrophic change is presupposed as part of this type of redemption. It is only the second sense of messiah as described in paragraph [b], namely a person who will save the people of Israel that is closer to the popular vision of the messiah in Judaism, though also in this case it is connected to an intellectual type of activity: the cleaving to the cosmic intellect.

Obviously the list of the three meanings is based upon a hierarchy, which starts with the more general or universal understanding of the messiah as a cosmic and universal entity, understood to be as the “true” one, then comes the national messiah, which concerns many people but not all, and finally comes the individual type of redemption, which affects only one person. Let me emphasize that all these three forms of redemption are described in the context

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<sup>37</sup> Namely, the material or potential intellect.

<sup>38</sup> *Commentary on Sefer ha-Melitz*, Ms. Rome-Angelica 38, fol. 9a, and Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 127, 140; idem, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 65-66; idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 66; and *Ben*, p. 308.

of the term messiah. This type of discourse based on homonymy, assumes also different types of narratives, a national and an individual one, as it has been suggested above in the case of the parable of the pearl.

This passage has been written in the same period like *'Or ha-Sekhel*. His means that a more complex type of understanding Abulafia should be adopted, at least when dealing with the parable, which assumes also some form of personal and spiritual redemption, not just one dealing with the national horizontal narrative. In a way similar to the intellectual understanding of the human savior [b], we read in another passage of the ecstatic Kabbalah:

“The prophet is necessarily called *Mashiyah* because he is anointed with the supernal oil that is called ‘the oil of anointing’<sup>39</sup>... with which he utilizes the Names. Actually the *Mashiyah* must possess two qualities: The first is that he must be anointed by God with wondrous prophecy and, the second he must continue to be consecrated by God and people, who will hail him as their great king of all times. And he will rule from sea to sea,<sup>40</sup> and this is all due to the great intensity of his clinging to the divine intellect and his reception of the power, in a strong manner like the matter of Moses, Joshua, David and Solomon. And the issue of Messiah will be known by everyone, and this is the reason why there is no need to announce here its issue more, because he is destined to reveal himself shortly in our days.”<sup>41</sup>

No doubt that this imminent revelation is related to Abulafia’s own mission. Two attributes of the Messiah are mentioned here: prophecy and power. However, power depends not on brutal force, but on some form of intellectual experience. The adherence to the supernal intellect allows the prophet, and implicitly also the Messiah, to perform miracles, which are understood as part of the laws of nature, following views found in Avicenna’s thought.<sup>42</sup> These passages and many others in Abulafia’s writings reflect his emphasis on individual redemption by clinging to the cosmic intellect, a stage that was conceived of as preceding the more public activity. In some other instances, Abulafia understood redemption in an interiorized manner, as some form of spiritual awaking.<sup>43</sup> This interiorized reading fits the manner in which the son is portrayed in the parable: he first lacks knowledge, then he gets it, and knowl-

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<sup>39</sup> Presumably the supernal intellectual influx that descends upon the prophet and the Messiah.

<sup>40</sup> See Zacharia 9:10.

<sup>41</sup> See Abulafia’s *Sefer Mafteah ha-Tokhehot*, a commentary on Deuteronomy, Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1605, fol. 46b.

<sup>42</sup> See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 63-71, relying on a passage from *'Or ha-Sekhel*.

<sup>43</sup> M. Idel, “‘The Time of the End’: Apocalypticism and Its Spiritualization in Abraham Abulafia’s Eschatology,” *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. A. Baumgarten, (Brill, Leiden, 2000), pp. 155-186.

edge is mentioned quiet conspicuously again in [c], where the obliteration of imagination is mentioned as part of the redemption. This reading constitutes the contribution of Maimonides's eschatology.

## 6. Universalization, or the Vertical, Psychological Allegory

In the passage from *'Or ha-Sekhel* that was translated above, there are many terms that point to some form of universality: universal speech, universal religion, and the resort to the term *kol*, namely all, several times. Also the mentioning of the human species in this passage points in this direction. Those occurrences are too dense in a relatively short text in order to be overlooked or underestimated and in my opinion they contain a major contribution that should be interrogated in order to understand Abulafia's intention.<sup>44</sup> No doubt the attainment of the state of totality is regarded as an ideal, and in any case superior in comparison to that of the particular.<sup>45</sup> By becoming universal, the particu-

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<sup>44</sup> Abulafia was especially fond of the language of universality, more than any other Kabbalist I am acquainted with, and this theme occurs also in other instances in his writings. See, e.g., some outstanding discussions among many others, found in his commentary on the book of Numbers, entitled *Mafteah ha-Sefirot*, ed. A. Gross, (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 56, where the "universal Kabbalah" and the "universal prophecy" are mentioned, together with the knowledge of the Torah and commandments, "in general". See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 185-186, and Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 198-199. Implicitly, a universal or general Kabbalah is referred to also in *'Or ha-Sekhel*, ed. Gross, p. 85 and in *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, 3:9, ed. Gross, p. 381. See also *ibidem*, 3:9, p. 349. Of special importance is the discussion found at the end of Abulafia's *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, where he writes that "the influx that he [the recipient] will receive and will comprehend from it the form of the universal wisdom, without time." See his *Sefer ha-Hesheq*, ed. A. Gross, (Jerusalem, 2002), p. 80. The timeless reception of the universals is what I call in this essay the transhistorical narrative. The "universal wisdom" is a term Abulafia took over from his teacher's *Commentary on Sefer Yetzirah*, R. Barukh Togarmi. Cf. Gershom Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah and of Abraham Abulafia*, ed. Y. ben Shlomo (Akadem, Jerusalem, 1969), p. 233. On the concept of "universal grace" – *Hen kelali*, that is also described as "divine" see Abulafia's *Shomer Mitzvah*, Ms. Paris BN 853, fol. 57a, ed. A. Gross (Jerusalem, 2000), p. 24, and Wolfson, *ibidem*, p. 223. The concept of the "universal" or "general secret" – *ha-sod ha-kelali* – recurs in his various writings. See also Elliot Wolfson, "Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence, Angelic Embodiment and the Alterity of Time in Abraham Abulafia," *Kabbalah*, vol. 18 (2008), pp. 172-178. I hope to deal with these and many other expressions of totality, universality or generality, elsewhere, as part of the impact of Averroes's views, and the ancient Israelite idea of God as encompassing everything. See, meanwhile, my *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 12-13, 75, 187 note 239, *idem*, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 5, 7, 17, 23 note 27. The two narratives discussed above, the national, exoteric, and the individual, esoteric are reminiscent of Averroes' theory of double truth, an issue that deserves a further investigation.

<sup>45</sup> Compare, however, the opposite interpretation of the concept of "universal speech" that occurs in our context by Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, p. 61: "an elocution that denotes not language in general or the potentiality for language as such, but rather the specific ethno-cultural linguistic comportment of the Jewish



lar expands itself and is substantially transformed. This transformation is not just a matter of the eschatological future but also of the past and the present, since the universal speech and religion have been referred already in paragraph [a] as a matter of the past.

This hierarchy of the particular and universal is not only a matter of higher forms of experience, but also of an ontological scheme that sees the universal as occupying an ontological level higher than the particular. In the vein of the Neoplatonic approach, where the main type of transformation is that of the particular soul into an universal soul, in some cases also an ascent of the lower and particular to the higher and universal source. Abulafia prefers, however, to speak of the transformation of the intellect. He explicitly indicates that the human intellectual faculty gradually ascends to the Agent Intellect. In his *Sefer Sitrei Torah* written some few years before *'Or ha-Sekhel*, we read:

“and will unite with it after many hard, strong and mighty exercises, until the particular and personal prophetic [faculty] will turn universal, permanent and everlasting, similar to the essence of its cause, and he and He will become one entity.”<sup>46</sup>

This is not a union in which the particular identity of the factors interacting is preserved, but a total transformation of the particular intellect is imagined to happen. It should be mentioned that Abulafia's imaginary of the expansion of the mind is paralleled by his image of the seven paths, namely seven concentric spheres, the highest being the most comprehensive, and corresponding to the most sublime form of exegesis, while the first or the lowest of these spheres is the most limited among them, dealing with the plain sense.<sup>47</sup>

In a work in a similar vein to Abulafia's Kabbalah, we read that “the power of speech is called the rational soul, which received the divine influx, called *Knesset Yisra'el*, whose secret is the Agent Intellect, which is also the universal influx, and which is the mother of the intellect of the world.”<sup>48</sup> Though not

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people, Hebrew, the language of creation, revelation, and redemption.” However, he did not adduce any support for this claim. This surprising particularistic interpretation of the text reflects Wolfson's attitude to Abulafia's interpretation of the parable, and to Abulafia's thought in general. See also below 58.

<sup>46</sup> Ms. Paris BN 774, fol. 155a, ed. Gross, p. 138. See also *ibidem*, p. 188: “You should separate yourself from the entire species, the universal man, and you will become universal for the special name.” This universalization by cleaving to the supernal spiritual realm means also an experience of atemporality. See the passage from *Ner 'Elohim*, translated in Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 125. On Abulafia and simplification see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 18-19. See also *idem*, “Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist ‘Son of God’,” p. 90 note 117. See also below note 95.

<sup>47</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 122-124.

<sup>48</sup> *Sefer 'Or ha-Menorah*, Ms. Jerusalem 8<sup>o</sup> 1303, fol. 28b. On this book see Idel, *Abraham Abulafia's*

totally identical to Abulafia's passage, the terminology is quite similar. Here universality is explicitly regarded as related to a higher ontological level and similarly we see the concern with the move toward language – power of speech – and presumably a more particular entity, the human intellect. In one case, found in R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah's book *Moses* is described, in terms quite similar to Abulafia's treatment of Moses elsewhere in *Sitrei Torah*,<sup>49</sup> as having

“been transformed into a universal [being] after being a particular, central point. And this is the matter of the lower man that ascended and became ‘the man who is on the throne,’<sup>50</sup> by the virtue of the power of the Name.”<sup>51</sup>

This description is closer to Neoplatonically-oriented transformations of the particular soul into the universal soul, a phenomenon I propose calling universalization.<sup>52</sup> This form of expression, which may or may not represent an experience that is different from others described as involving cleaving and a mystical union, already had a history in Jewish mysticism, and R. Nathan's *Sha'arei Tzedeq* is just one link in a longer chain of tradition. Indeed, some lines further, our author refers explicitly to the “soul of all.”<sup>53</sup> Moses's transformation was accomplished by means of a name in Hebrew, *ha-shem*, which consists of the same consonants like *Mosheh* – a term that stands for the Tetragrammaton, though its consonants have been permuted. Therefore, by resorting to the Kabbalistic technique based on names used by the Kabbalist, Moses was imagined to become a supernal man. The above transformation from the particular to the general is found elsewhere in a student of the author of *Sha'arei Tzedeq* R. Isaac of Acre. This famous Kabbalist mentions that “the Nought, that encompasses everything” and

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*Works and Doctrine*, p. 79. On the term *Knesset Yisrae'el* in similar contexts see idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 80 and the pertinent footnotes.

<sup>49</sup> M. Idel, “Universalization and Integration: Two Conceptions of Mystical Union in Jewish Mysticism,” in *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith: An Ecumenical Dialogue*, eds. M. Idel and B. McGinn (MacMillan, New York, 1989), p. 30. See also idem, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, p. 106. It should be pointed out that not all prophecy is conceived by Abulafia as leading to the experience of universalization. See *Shomer Mitzvah*, ed. Gross, pp. 5-6.

<sup>50</sup> Ezekiel 1:26. It should be noted that this verse is the proof text for the Midrashic dictum about the prophets that compares the form to the entity that forms them, adduced by Rabbi Nathan in the passage quoted from a book of R. Isaac of Acre, in R. Moses of Kiev. On the concept of “the point,” which in Abulafia's writings refers either to the agent intellect or to the human soul, see Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>51</sup> Natan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar, *Le porte della Giustizia*, p. 385.

<sup>52</sup> More on the concept of universalization in Abulafia and its sources see Idel, “Universalization and Integration,” pp. 28-33.

<sup>53</sup> Natan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar, *Le porte della Giustizia*, p. 385.

“the soul should cleave to Nought and become universal and comprehensive after being particular because of her palace when she was imprisoned in it, [she] will become universal, in the secret of the essence of the secret of her place from which she was hewn.”<sup>54</sup>

Given the centrality of the process of universalization in those texts, and others that cannot be adduced in this framework, I propose to see them in the context of the concepts of universal speech and universal religion, both in the past and in the future. I would read the content of passage [a1], dealing with the distancing from the universal religion as something negative, as complemented by the process of universalization of the intellect. In other words, those are two complementary movements, reminiscent of the Neo-Platonic procession and regression. The human intellect, when purified of imaginary contents turns universal, reaching some form of prophecy or a parallel state to the universal religion. These vertical motions are transhistorical and individual, not national. Moses, who gave the Torah is not necessarily an historical figure. According to one of the views of Maimonides it was only Moses among the prophets that did not use imagination.<sup>55</sup> Abulafia would say that this disappearance of imagination is basically a cognitive, not a historical event, as we shall see immediately below. In any case, unlike Maimonides, Abulafia thought that the Messiah will be higher than Moses,<sup>56</sup> and provided that he thought that he is the Messiah, the implications are obvious: a higher revelation is envisioned as possible. In any case, what is quite central in Abulafia’s Kabbalistic approach is the spiritualization of the Hebrew Bible, Rabbinic Judaism and in some cases of theosophical Kabbalah, as referring esoterically to inner processes, which have salvific valences.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> ‘*Otzar Hayyim*, Ms. Moscow-Ginsburg 775, fol. 233b. I translated the rather exceptional formulation found in this version, which uses “Nought” in lieu of ‘*Ein Sof*, as is also the case in the version of this passage extant in Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1911, fol. 154b. “Nought” is *va-tidbbaq nefesh zo be-’ayin*; “her palace” is *Heikhalah*. The latter is a recurrent image in R. Isaac’s writings for the body. See also the quote from an unnamed Kabbalist, adduced in R. Nathan Ben Sa’adyah’s *Sha’arei Tzedeq*, in *Le porte della Giustizia*, p. 373, and in the Hebrew translation of the anonymous *Peraqim be-Hatzlalah*, attributed to Maimonides, ed. D. Baneth (Mekize Nirdamim, Jerusalem, 1939), p. 17.

<sup>55</sup> Maimonides had more than one view on this issue. See Dov Schwartz, “Psychological Dimensions of Moses’s Prophecy – Imagination and Intellect: The Metamorphoses of Esoteric Traditions in Jewish Rationalism,” *Moses, The Father of Prophets*, eds. M. Hallamish, H. Kasher, H. ben Pazi, (Bar Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan, 2010), pp. 251-283 (Hebrew). See also below note 93.

<sup>56</sup> In *Sitrei Torah*, ed. Gross, pp. 11-12, Moses is portrayed as attaining the most perfect intellectual achievement possible to a man.

<sup>57</sup> See M. Idel, “The Time of the End’: Apocalypticism and Its Spiritualization in Abraham Abulafia’s Eschatology,” *Apocalyptic Time*, ed. A. Baumgarten, (Brill, Leiden, 2000), pp. 155-186 and Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” p. 177.

The process of universalization seems to be also the clue for the understanding the new attitude of the persons to each other at the end of [c] as part of a more general category: the species. The individual loses his particular status and approaches all the others as part of a more general and unified category, which as a whole, will be in contact with the divine. In the eschaton, individuals belong, according to this view, to their species and the nations are no more mentioned. The integration of individuals in a more general entity he refers to as the human species does not include the integration of their religions, but rather a process of simplification, which means the spiritualization of the essence of the individual persons, namely the purification of the process of cognition from imagination, that is based on composed images. This is the main reason why in the translated passage Abulafia has referred twice to the concept of human species as a whole. It seems that we have here as version of the encounter of the one with the One. More something ascends to the diviner, more unified it is. In this context it seems that the necessity of language for inter-human communication is rather questionable: if all the people are limbs of a utopian great organism that is constituted by the human species, then no one speaks to his own limbs. If this is the case, the perfect language is not found in the Jewish nation in the present, given its plight in the exile, while in the future, when the pearl will return to the son in accordance to the national narrative, it will become superfluous. Will the sublimation of the spoken languages, or the historical one, be sublimated by ascending to the intellectual form of activity, in a manner reminiscent of Maimonides' approach to mental prayer? Is such sublimation connected to the effacement of imagination to that will be mentioned in one of the passages from *'Or ha-Sekhel*, to be translated below?

To formulate the quandary in different terms: if in the exilic situation there is a hope for the son to receive the pearl, namely the three virtues, as distinct from the servants, in the eschaton, he will not receive them when he is a separate entity, but as part of the unification of the entire human species, but not as part of different nations that keep their particular nature. In my opinion, the cessation of the antagonism between people or nations is the result of the disappearance of the imaginative power. The species is, naturally, a category more general than the nation. Abulafia's specific emphasis on the individual can be discerned if we compare the content of the biblical verses he uses as a proof-text to his own words: while the verse speaks about the nations, Abulafia speaks at the end of [c] about the individuals: the "members of the species".

This means that the son, if described as the Jewish nation in accordance to the historical narrative, not only does not possess the pearl in the present, but will not get the pearl in accordance to the end, that discusses the comprehensive human organism. The only solution to this quandary is that there is another nar-

native that should be taken in consideration, one that progresses from the spoken languages to the universal language and from there to the source that generates that universal language, namely to the cosmic intellect. Thus the process of descent that was mentioned at the beginning of the passage that introduces the parable [a], and the image of the pearl in the pit fits this picture, was reverted by the return of the pearl in its brilliance [b] and [c].

### *7. What is the Pearl?*

Historical religions started with the assumption that the fundamental religious event, the revelation, took place at their very beginning. The institutional revelation is conceived of in need to interpretation, clarification or eventually even expansion, but it is hardly conceived of as replaceable. This is most evident in Maimonides's (exoteric?) approach, where Moses is the perfect figure and the Torah cannot change. Its esoteric meanings can indeed be lost, or obfuscated and then restored, but not exchanged, as Muslim claimed, or supplemented, as Christians did, as the Great Eagle has so authoritatively claimed.

With Abulafia, it seems that the situation is different. Assuming a universal religion based on acts of intellection, the Torah as a specific revelation to the Israelites and Jews, formulated in a specific language, is limited. In his Kabbalistic project Abulafia wanted to demonstrate not the truth of Rabbinic Judaism as understood by the Rabbis, but the truth of his own special message and he strove for the universal understanding of Judaism as an intellectual, and thus a universal type of religion. The critique of Christianity comes, therefore, together with a dislocation of genetic sonship in Judaism, as the single principle of Jewish identity, as it has been understood in Rabbinic Judaism. It is not the historical Judaism that will prevail, but an esoteric, spiritual version, dramatically influenced by Greek philosophy, and gravitating around the divine name, that will transcend the historical religions. Rabbinic Judaism, like Christianity or Islam, will not be integrated in this religion, but transcended by it, either in the experience of the individual in the present or of the collective unified humanity as a whole in the future, if we accept the veracity of the national-historical narrative.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Compare, however, my universalistic, esoteric and spiritually-oriented approach to the parable to another, more particularistic and historically-oriented understanding of this story in Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, pp. 60-61, 64-67, and see above note 45. The basic difference between Wolfson's and my approach in understanding Abulafia's thought is grounded in basic methodological matters on how to read Abulafia's

The old-new religion, like the pearl, does not emerge in a specific historical moment in the future, but is coexistent to reality and may enter history in a certain moment. The genetic Jews have indeed the propensity to accept this spiritual intrusion in history more than others, as they are conceived of as having some form of intellectual preparation but neither in the past and nor in the present they do not actually possess the pearl, which is the patrimony of the “real” Jews, namely the prophets or the mystics. This is the reason why Abulafia is so critical of Rabbis, especially those in his generation.<sup>59</sup>

The question may be asked what is the pearl after all?<sup>60</sup> My assumption is that just as Hebrew is not the specific Hebrew language in its historical manifestations but the basic principles that govern all languages,<sup>61</sup> also religion is not a specific manifestation in history but a more abstract or general principle. Indeed, in many passages Abulafia refers to the name *'hwy* as the hidden name of God, hidden or perhaps unknown even to Moses. Those consonants are also conceived of as half-vowels, and described in several texts in Abulafia and before him in books on Hebrew grammar as the letters of occultation: *'otiyot ha-ha'alah*. This name is also conceived of as hinted in the consonants of

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writings. The particularistic mode corresponds, roughly speaking, to the national-historical narrative, while I assume the existence of a two-tiered form of interpretation, with the spiritual and esoteric level as higher from Abulafia's point of view. In general, Wolfson's more particularistic approach to the views of this Kabbalist or his more concrete readings of Abulafia's statements differs from my more metaphorical or allegorical, and thus more universal, manner of reading, and those differences still deserve a special study that will discuss analyses of specific texts adduced in support of the two approaches. In any case, insofar as the topic of sonship is concerned, Wolfson's brief discussion leaves out some of the most pertinent material on the topic. What is even more surprising, is the fact that the quintessential role played by the philosophical aspects of Abulafia's discussions of this topic have been neglected in this context. See, e.g., in addition to the passage from *Sitrei Torah* referred above, also *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, 1.1, ed. A. Gross, (Jerusalem, 2000), p. 5 and further more *ibid.*, 2.7, p. 267, and 3:9, p. 347, where the firstborn son is interpreted explicitly as the human intellect to be rescued from the material forces. For a similar situation when Abulafia's explicit view that does not fit Wolfson's claim as to the particularism of the ecstatic Kabbalist, is not taken in consideration see Idel, “On the Secrets of Torah in Abraham Abulafia,” pp. 422 note 239, 425 note 429. Last but not least: Wolfson is more concerned with esotericism that he finds in the semiotic field, namely the problem of ineffability, and the expression of the experience while I am concerned here more with forms of political esotericism. See also above note 15.

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., Abulafia's *Mafteah ha-Ra'ayon*, ed. A. Gross, (Jerusalem, 2002), pp. 23-24, 45, Idel, “On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia,” pp. 423-424, *idem*, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 74-75, 184 note 203 and also in the passage translated above beside note 38.

<sup>60</sup> For the resort to pearl in a similar parable see the source pointed out to me by Shlomo Pines, see his “The Jewish Christians according to a New Source,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities*, vol. II (1956), pp. 37-38, note 139, Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 57 note 20, and Shagrir, “The Parable of the Three Rings,” pp. 167-168.

<sup>61</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, pp. 22-24.

the two divine names *YHWH* and *'eHeYeH*.<sup>62</sup> What is however important is the fact that this name played an important role especially in *'Or ha-Sekhel*.<sup>63</sup> The underlying assumption is that just as God revealed to Moses a new name *'eHeYeH*, in the context of his redemptive mission, so also the Messiah will be taught a new name, most probably in this case, according to Abulafia, to him. In a way, this name is the most refined part of language, a word that is vocalic, the closest possible to a sublimation of the linguistic process. In any case, the mystical technique found in *Sefer 'Or ha-Sekhel*, is based on the combination of letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the letters of the Tetragrammaton, found in several tables that illustrate the technique, presumably some form of elevation of the ordinary letters by their conjunction to the semi-vowels components of the Tetragrammaton.

In his opinion the pearl, which is the symbol of the pure religion in Abulafia's version of the famous three rings parallel, was not to be found among Israel in his time.<sup>64</sup> It follows that the mission of Moses, the law-giver, was not entirely successful or at least not final, and there is room of a more advanced form of religion, or a superior Judaism.<sup>65</sup> This is the reason why Abulafia imagined that he can bring a new religious revelation, namely the yet unrevealed divine name, which is described as the purest form of language from the linguistic point of view, and the supreme reference to God in a religious framework, as it is the real and unknown name of God. Indeed in his commentary on his prophetic book entitled *Sefer ha-Haftarah*, written around 1282, we find an important passage for clarifying Abulafia's approach. The speaker in the following passage as the first person is God, – or the Agent Intellect – who reveals to Abulafia that

“A New Torah<sup>66</sup> I innovate nowadays amongst the holy nation, it is the people of

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<sup>62</sup> See e.g., Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 140-141, idem, “*Sefer Yetzirah* and its Commentaries in the Writing of R. Abraham Abulafia, and the Remnants of R. Isaac Bedershi's Commentary and Their Impact,” *Tarbiz*, vol. 79 (2011), pp. 513 note 270, 522 note 327, and Wolfson, “Kenotic Overflow and Temporal Transcendence,” p. 180.

<sup>63</sup> See *'Or ha-Sekhel*, ed. Gross, pp. 47, 48, 70, 77, 85. See also the passage from the introduction to this book p. 3, to be translated in the next section and *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, ed. Gross, pp. 346-347, where these four letters are described as the elements of “all speech”, presumably a parallel to the concept of universal speech discussed above.

<sup>64</sup> See Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 140. This interpretation has been accepted by Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, p. 69.

<sup>65</sup> idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>66</sup> For the concept of New Torah in Abulafia see M. Idel, “Torah *Hadashah*” – Messiah and the New Torah in Jewish Mysticism and Modern Scholarship,” *Kabbalah*, vol. 21 (2010), pp. 70-78.

Israel, [which is] My sublime Name that is like a New Torah. And it has not been explained to My nation since the day I have hidden My face from them. And though it is a hidden name, it is explained.”<sup>67</sup> And then He commanded him<sup>68</sup> to hide no more His name from those who inquire it in truth.”<sup>69</sup>

This means that until around 1280, the hidden name, *'hwy*, was imagined to be unknown by the public though known by Abulafia, and since then it is allowed to reveal it and it constitutes a sort of New Torah. In a way the hidden nature of the name is reminiscent of the hidden pearl in a pit, according to the parable that was discussed in exactly the same period. This name, which is plausibly also the new Torah, is not a brand new type of information but a possibility to fathom the depth of the biblical text, by resorting to the Kabbalistic techniques advanced by Abulafia, which consists in finding out the secret, still unrevealed divine name by combining the consonants of two other divine names. Those two layers coexist in the Bible, but are intended to quite different audiences: the esoteric one to the elite, the plain sense to the vulgus. Having gain access to the esoteric layer is conceived by Abulafia as tantamount to redemption, which in his terms means a personal and intellectual salvation.

In short, the main contents of Abulafia's Kabbalah represent the exegetical techniques and the divine names, conceived of as representing on the one hand the secret layer of the Torah, the New Torah, or the new revelation, on the one hand the means for redemption. The coexistence of the normal, plain sense of the Torah and the esoteric one, that has a salvific dimension in the present, is a matter of what I call synchronism<sup>70</sup>, which hosts two diverging approaches,

<sup>67</sup> Namely revealed.

<sup>68</sup> Namely to Abulafia, who speaks about himself at a third person when he interprets the meaning of the revelations he received.

<sup>69</sup> *Perush Sefer ha-Haftarah*, Ms. Roma-Angelica 38, fol. 37a, ed. A. Gross, (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 113. More on this quote and its implications see Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 306-307, idem, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 140-141. It should be mentioned that in the same book Abulafia describes it also as *Sefer ha-Besorah*, which is the Hebrew equivalent of *Evangelion*. See idem, *Messianic Mystics*, p. 108. On the divine name as the quintessence of the esoteric Torah see the more elaborated discussions of Abulafia's student R. Joseph Gikatilla, especially in his famous *Sha'arei 'Orah*, and issue that requires a separate inquiry. It seems that Abulafia approximates the triangular structure of Gikatilla's vision of the words in the Torah, with a divine name at the top, then ten divine names and then seventy cognomens, and at the basis of the triangle there are all the other words, in his various writings, especially in *'Or ha-Sekhel*, ed. Gross, pp. 72-73. See M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections, Kabbalah and Interpretation* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2002), pp. 360-367. While the hidden name, or in other cases the Tetragrammaton, is on the top of a pyramid or triangle, Abulafia's combinations of letter of the divine names that constitute his mystical techniques have a lower status than it, and then all the other words of the text of the Hebrew Bible are even lower, each series of words depending on the higher ones.

<sup>70</sup> See Idel, “Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist “Son of God”,” pp. 62-64. My assumption as to the



reflected by the terms hidden and revealed. This seems to me to be the case when Abulafia describes the future state of things, but in a way this is a self-referential statement, as it deal with the revelation of the divine name

“in the future...all the three nations [namely the three monotheistic religions] will know God by the name as it is said “For then I shall turn to the people a pure language that they may all call upon the name of the Lord”<sup>71</sup> The great wisdom of the redeemer shall be the cause of this knowledge. Of him it was said<sup>72</sup>: “Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and excellent, and shall be very high.” In the tradition [*qabbalah*] it has been said: “He shall be more exalted – than Moses, and more extolled – than Abraham, and higher than the ministering angels – greater than any man.”<sup>73</sup>

The assumption of the higher status of the Messiah as higher than Moses has to do also with another important topic: The enormous gap between Abulafia’s view of the essence of the Torah, as possessing a paramount esoteric layer that may even contradict the plain sense, on the one hand, and that espoused by his Rabbinic contemporaries as dealing with laws and parables on the other hand, brought him to the conclusion that the Torah in its purity is not yet to be found in the hands of the people of Israel, but will be revealed in its entirety only during the Messianic era.

In Abulafia’s parable he indicates that the unique pearl, which symbolizes the true religion, is in the hand of no historical religion in the present. Indeed the nation of Israel has priority in receiving it, in that they are the ‘son’ of God, but they have not yet received it, as he angered the father and is devoid of knowledge.<sup>74</sup> I would say that just as the potential intellect has the propensity to receive the actualized intellect, but it is still within sunk in matter, desire or imagination, also the Jews are capable of receiving the new Torah, or the knowledge of the divine name, more than the servants – that presumably point allegorically to the other historical religions, according to the historical narrative, and to lower human capacities according to the transhistorical one. In my opinion these lower capacities include imagination, about which Abulafia

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assumption of synchronism in Abulafia hardly fits a vision that is comparable to the Joachimites’ theory of the development in history in three distinct phases, the later one being the most spiritual.

<sup>71</sup> Zefania 3:9. This is an important proof-text for Abulafia’s theory. See also, e.g. his, *Sefer Shomer Mitzvah*, ed. A. Gross, (Jerusalem, 2001), p. 40.

<sup>72</sup> Isaiah 52:13.

<sup>73</sup> *Mafteah ha-Shemot*, Ms. New York, JTS 843, fol. 68b. For the source of Abulafia’s discussion see Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 50-51. See also idem, *Ben*, p. 323.

<sup>74</sup> See Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, p. 75.

writes, in a memorable passage from *'Or ha-Sekhel*, where he allegorizes some biblical verses, offering a threefold categorization of the activity of the imaginative faculty:

“But imagination never realizes true existence, but it is “a strong ass couching down between the sheepfolds.”<sup>75</sup> Once it tends to the sensible and it keeps its existence as the senses comprehend it, the other time it tends to the intelligibilia and keeps its existence as [long as] the intellect comprehends it, and sometimes it invents everything from its heart, and there is no reality to it at all, despite the fact that it thinks that whatever it comprehended is solely the truth and there is not truth but this third imaginative comprehension is inducing in error and confuses every true comprehension, and when the abovementioned imaginative, false comprehension will be obliterated, and its memory be effaced from the hearts of the senses and intellectuals, “death will be destroyed forever and God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the insult of his people shall he take away from off all the earth”<sup>76</sup> namely [the verse points to] the secret of the intellect as it was revealed after been hidden.”<sup>77</sup>

The statement found in the opening sentence is crucial: imagination does not allow a comprehension of reality. It indeed serves the senses and the intellect, or sometimes runs wild, but in any case alone it is not reliable. According to another statement of his, an effacement of imagination is conceived of as possible and even necessary for the emergence of the intellect. In a later treatise he speaks about the possibility of killing imagination.<sup>78</sup> I wonder whether this is not a reference, on the historical level, to Christianity as imagination, which is to be understood also as a component of everyone's spiritual structure, including Abulafia, when unredeemed.<sup>79</sup> This means that the eschaton he describes is not specifically a matter of the remote future but is basically a psychological process, which can be achieved by some individuals already in the present. Also the assumption of a “hidden” intellect shows that the potential for present redemption is found already in the past, in a manner reminiscent of Averroes's specific theory of the intellect, and it is not a matter of an event in the future

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<sup>75</sup> Genesis 49:14. See also Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, 59, 76. The consonants of *Hamor*, in Hebrew ass, are the same like *Homer*, matter. In *'Or ha-Sekhel*, Abulafia connects imagination to the compounded entities. See ed. Gross, p. 71.

<sup>76</sup> Isaiah 25:8.

<sup>77</sup> *'Or ha-Sekhel*, ed. Gross, p. 119. See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, pp. 99-100, 144, idem, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 66, and idem, “Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist “Son of God”,” pp. 80-81.

<sup>78</sup> *Sefer Gan Na 'ul*, ed. A. Gross, (Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 58-59. See also Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 132.

<sup>79</sup> See idem, “Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist “Son of God”,” pp. 78-83.

alone. In any case, the emphasis in recent scholarship of the ecstatic Kabbalist on the role of imagination as a positive factor in Abulafia's gnoseology as a human faculty to be "integrated" in a higher form of experience, is in my opinion, quite problematic, especially when a perusal of the pages of his *'Or ha-Sekhel* is seriously undertaken.<sup>80</sup> When dealing with the highest religious experience we may better speak about the disintegration of the complex human personality, compounded as it is of higher and lower faculties, and its reduction to the intellectual faculty alone, a process I called simplification. God was referred in many cases in Abulafia's writings as simple, *Pashut*, in a manner many other medieval sources did, and universalization and union with God necessitates simplification.

#### 8. *'Or ha-Sekhel* and R. Nathan the Wise

I have attempted to draw material pertinent for the interpretation of Abulafia's parable from its immediate literary context, namely the book where it was embedded, *'Or ha-Sekhel*, as well as from his other Kabbalistic books written shortly beforehand, like *Sitrei Torah*, and his commentaries on his prophetic books, or R. Nathan's *Sha'arei Tzedeq*, one of the two Kabbalists to whom the book *'Or ha-Sekhel* has been dedicated. This seems to me to be the best methodological approach to understand his views, which could change over the years. Likewise, I tried to rely on the sources he read, and sometimes commented, like Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* or Averroes, a book of whom he quotes in one of his epistles, and Abulafia could have been acquainted with his thought since his only avowed teacher in matters of philosophy in his youth, R. Hillel of Verona, was well acquainted with at least some of Averroes's writings. This more cautious approach does not prevent the possible impact of other, unnamed sources, but methodologically it is wiser to exhaust the possible contribution of what is evident before turning to hypothetical sources and their presumed impact.

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<sup>80</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 80-85. Wolfson's – and following him Sagerman's – where a theory of integration of the lower faculties in Abulafia's thought, and in the theosophical Kabbalah in general is assumed, – see the latter's *The Serpent Kills*, pp. 187, 190-191, 193, 235, 253, 255, 321 etc.. However, this assumption is conditioned by the implicit assumption as to the maintenance of some form of identity of the various nations in the historical narrative, or human capacities in the highest type of utopian experience, according to the transhistorical one, while my assumption is that the highest experience is one of universalization, which means also simplification, which effaces differences, as mentioned above in note 46. My view of Abulafia's esoteric approach is a disjunctive one rather than an integrative-harmonistic one. See also note 90 below.

In the vein of this approach let me turn to Abulafia's mentioning the name of R. Nathan in the introduction to his book:

"In this book I intend to assist those who begin the meditation on the divine name, and I shall show them the path of its knowledge, so that this treatise will be in relation to the knowledge of famous name, according to the path of the prophetic Kabbalah, just as the relation between the account of Creation is to the account of the Chariot. Behold, I had been triggered to do so because of the love of two friends, who are lovers of wisdom, of the community of the sons of Messina in Sicily, who brought me very close to them, and they follow my discipline and their name is R. Abraham the Illuminated [*Abraham ha-maskki*] and R. Nathan the Wise [*Nathan ha-navon*]. Because after being for a few days with them<sup>81</sup> they asked me to write them the general principles in a short manner, regarding the knowledge of the supreme and awesome name. And out of the true love that I loved them I compelled myself to willfully supply their requirement...and I know that this treatise will assist them and those like them very much."<sup>82</sup>

Let me start with the two epithets that Abulafia confers on his two students: illuminated and wise. The meaning of these terms fits the title of the book: the *Light of the Intellect* that deals with the influx of the tenth, cosmic intellect. In my opinion this is the major move in this treatise: to open the minds of the students to the intellectual light, by resorting to some form of vocal technique, which is formulated in many details. This ultimate goal is related, as seen in the last passage, to the divine name, 'hwy, as the secret name revealed first to Abulafia, as mentioned above. The comparison of this topic to the account of the chariot, a major topic in Abulafia's speculations, shows how important it was for him.

Thus, here is a book where the parable of the son and the pearl are mentioned, and it was dedicated to a Kabbalist named Nathan the Wise. It is hard to avoid the connotation of the title of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's famous play *Nathan the Wise* [1779], where a version of the three rings is found. Is this a mere coincidence? In any case, a manuscript of '*Or ha-Sekhel* is found in a library in Berlin.<sup>83</sup> So far, I was unable to establish a possible connection

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<sup>81</sup> Since Abulafia was in Messina already in 1281, it seems that '*Or ha-Sekhel* has been written not later than 1283. Compare, however the datation to 1285 by Shagrir, "The Parable of the Three Rings," p.

171, and Hames, *Like Angels on Jacob's Ladder*, p. 66.

<sup>82</sup> Ms. Vatican 233, fols. 1b-2a, ed. Gross, p. 3. For two other occurrences of R. Nathan in Abulafia's writings see Idel, *The Mystical Experience*, p. 134. For Abulafia's referring to his students, including R. Nathan and R. Abraham, by theophoric names, see Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy*, pp. 81-84.

<sup>83</sup> Ms. Berlin 122, Or. 8° 358, fols. 1-59b. The names of the two students are hinted at again ibidem, p.

between the passages discussed above and Lessing, neither between them and Lessing's acquaintance, the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, who could, on the ground of his knowing Hebrew, mediate them to Lessing. Perhaps new material I am not acquainted with will be able to find out such a possible linkage.

### *9. Abraham Abulafia – the Possessor of the Pearl*

It seems that Abulafia adopted a version of the parable on the true religion different than the more widespread one in Europe by purpose: In the above parable there is only one son and not three, there are not three rings but only one pearl alone, and finally there are no artifacts of rings or pearls. However, even more divergent than the details of the parable is in comparison to most of the other versions, is the specific mystical framework, as discussed above, which is more sophisticated than anything I am acquainted with in the interpretations offered to other versions. The peak of this sophistication is, in my opinion, to be found in the implicit assumption that the real son in the parable is no other than Abraham Abulafia himself, and the pearl is in the possession of the teller of the parable, namely this Kabbalist. Here the present and the future times are collapsing into a situation that is, in Abulafia's opinion, moving rapidly toward some form of more general redemption, though he himself may be imagined as redeemed already beforehand because of the revelations he received. In any case, since the hidden divine name has been already revealed some years earlier, now everyone can redeem himself by using it. The eschatological content of Abulafia's prophetic books that deal with revelations he received around 1279/1280 in Greece but mostly in Italy, and the commentaries he wrote mainly in Messina in 1282 on these books that themselves were lost, point to a situation similar to the emergence of the pearl from the pit by the father and his giving it to the son. May we assume that the pit is no other the imaginary casting of the historical religions?

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4, where they are described as the sons of his intellect. This treatise is extant in 30 manuscripts, some of which are found in European libraries. On Lessing's views and sources there is a rich bibliography. See, e.g., the edition of the English translation of Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*, by George A. Kohut, (Bloch Publishing House, New York, 1917), p. 117, where he translated Abulafia's parable but without mentioning the name of Rabbi Nathan the Wise; or Yossef Schwartz, "Three Rings or Three Cheats – Revealed Religions and Pluralism between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment," in eds. R. Livneh-Freudenthal – E. Reiner, *Streams into the Sea, Studies in Jewish Culture and its Content dedicated to Felix Posen*, (Alma College, Tel Aviv, 2001), pp. 268-281.

Moreover, Abulafia conceived himself of as being an intellectual son of God and a prophet, in addition of being a messiah.<sup>84</sup> Thus, he imagined that he possesses attributes that he ascribed to the son in the parable. It should be emphasized that my proposal to read the parable allegorically, not only historically, is part of a broader understanding of Abulafia's general project, intended to spiritualize, as mentioned above, as much as possible. This is obvious, for example, in the case of Abulafia's interpretation of redemption as understood in popular Judaism as spiritual revivification,<sup>85</sup> in the case of Messianism, as seen above when he proposes three meanings of the term Messiah, as well as in his understanding of the nature of the Jews as those individuals that confess the divine name.<sup>86</sup> All these issues are major topics in Abulafia's religious worldview, and in these cases the allegorical interpretation he offered constitutes a fresh, explicit understanding of subject-matters that were accepted in their concrete sense by generations of Rabbinic Jews.

Let adduce one more example for his allegorical understanding of a vital topic in biblical and Rabbinic Judaism, the ancient Temple ritual. In an epistle Abulafia wrote as follows:

“whoever wants to come into the Temple and enter to its inmost part, has to sanctify himself by the sanctify of the High Priest and to study and teach and keep and do, until he will be perfect in his ethical and intellectual attributes, and then he should seclude himself<sup>87</sup> in order to receive the prophetic influx from the mouth of the Dynamis.”<sup>88</sup>

Abulafia himself was not of priestly extraction, neither was he especially interested in rebuilding of a material Temple, despite his belief that he is the Messiah. He was of Israeli extraction and as such he could not, halakhically speaking, serve as a priest, even less as a high priest. His resort to the templar themes that is understood allegorically is reminiscent of Philo's and Plotin's

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<sup>84</sup> Idel, *Ben*, pp. 310-311, 316.

<sup>85</sup> See Idel, “The Time of the End.”

<sup>86</sup> See e.g., idem, “Abraham Abulafia: A Kabbalist ‘Son of God’,” pp. 64-68, 78, idem, “‘The Time of the End’,” p. 172, idem, “On the Secrets of the Torah in Abraham Abulafia,” pp. 433-434, idem, *Kabbalah in Italy*, pp. 84-88.

<sup>87</sup> *yitboded*. This term can be translated here also as “concentrate”. See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 103-169.

<sup>88</sup> *Matzref la-Kesef*, Ms. Sassoon 56, fols. 33b-34a. Compare also to ‘*Otzar Eden Ganuz* 1:10, ed. Gross, p. 190, in the parallel to the context of the parable in the ‘*Or ha-Sekhel*, where the assumption is that the prophet is the head of the priestly tribe, a fact that does not fit at all Abulafia's own extraction as an Israelite.

views on this topic,<sup>89</sup> though I have no reason to assume a direct influence of any of their writings on Abulafia's thought. In this case the impact of Maimonides's Neoaristotelianism is, let me emphasize, the main source for the allegorical interpretation in this Kabbalist's approach. Like in the philosophers' cases, also Abulafia is concerned much more with a private experience, unlike the ancient Jewish templar ritual, where the high priest is the representative of the all the Israelites, not just a private individual. In a way, the formulation of Abulafia opens the possibility to a democratic understanding of his ritual: "however wants to come" though the concepts of perfections and seclusion represent the much more elitist approach, as part of his epistle that was written, most probably, to one of his disciples. In any case, I am not acquainted with any discussion in Kabbalistic texts that may parallel the claims made in the last citation from the point of view of the dramatic allegorization and democratization of the ancient ritual.

In the above case, the spiritual sense is, most evidently, not accompanied by an actual performance of the Temple ritual, as the temple was destroyed for centuries. In fact, the concentration of Abulafia's Kabbalah on the pronunciation of the divine names represents both a continuation and a replacement of the most important ritual performed in the ancient Temple, the pronunciation of the divine name by the High Priest as part of the ritual of the Day of Atonement. This case of spiritualization opens the question as to whether the assumption as to the necessity of the actual performance of other rituals is indeed vital for understanding the manner in which Abulafia's Kabbalah functioned, and in our specific case, whether the spiritual interpretation of the parable is necessarily dependent on the assumption of the veracity of the historical narrative.

In our case it seems evident that Abulafia's ritual is an alternative, most plausibly conceived of as higher, than the most important rites in ancient Judaism, the Templar ritual. In a way Abulafia proposes a ritual that was contrived by him and found one of his most influential expression in *'Or ha-Sekhel*, and this ritual implicitly supersedes by its spiritual efficacy the other rituals intended to younger people, by being effective in bringing someone closest to the cosmic intellect as much as possible.<sup>90</sup> From this point of view, this is the

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<sup>89</sup> See M. Idel, "Hitbodedut: On Solitude in Jewish Mysticism," in eds. Aleida und Jan Assmann, *Einsamkeit, Archaeologie der literarischen Kommunikation*, VI (Fink, Muenchen, 2000), pp. 192-198.

<sup>90</sup> I disagree with Wolfson's assumption, expressed in many place in his studies, as to the hypernomian nature of Abulafia's Kabbalah. See, e.g., his *Abraham Abulafia*, p. 209. As to the tension between the esoteric and the exoteric senses see above note 22. In this context see also my "The Kabbalistic Interpretations of the Secret of Incest in Early Kabbalah," *Kabbalah*, vol. 12 (2004), pp. 158-159 (Hebrew), and above note

universal religion, language and script that are of supreme religious importance to the human species. However, he hardly dared to formulate his intention in an explicit manner, given the persecutions that could result from such a radical approach, and persecutions seemed to haunt him during his career. Even prophecy, related as it is to imagination, to speech and to writing, is a lower form of activity in comparison to the much purer state achieved by the act of universalization, which assumes some form of perfect intellection.

The Kabbalist interpreted the parable and the meaning of the pearl in terms that reflect his own messianic mission, which has strong intellectual overtones that transcend the historical religions. Not being interested in the question which of the three historical religions is the true one as in the ordinary versions of the three rings parable, he proposed another, competing alternative, which transcends the particular religions.<sup>91</sup> His understanding of the highest form of religious life as a matter of inner development moving from lower to higher forms of cognition, and the effacement, not the integration of the lower in order to be able to attain the higher. This process should be understood also as referring to historical religions that emerged out of the descent of the influx of the cosmic universal intellect and its transformation into the imaginative representations, which include conventionally established languages and institutional structures that constitute these religions, and their return to the universal status in the ideal situation means the transcendence of the specifics of their manifestations. Meanwhile, each of the historical religions accuses the others as being idolatrous, as one of the followers of Abulafia's Kabbalah claimed, and such a statement puts Judaism of his present time in the same category as all the other historical religions.<sup>92</sup> Though proclaiming the superiority of Judaism in many cases in his writings, Abulafia nevertheless reinterpreted the nature of this

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80. In *'Or ha-Sekhel*, ed. Gross, p. 25, this Kabbalist envisions the performance of the commandments as preserving some form of social or psychological order, whose existence allows the attainment of the comprehension of God. On commandments as a political issue see two passages from *'Otzar 'Eden Ganuz*, pp. 121, 123.

<sup>91</sup> In my opinion, a discussion about the nature of what the Kabbalist conceived of as the higher, universal religion, was the purpose of Abulafia's attempt to meet the Pope in the summer of 1280. See M. Idel, "Abraham Abulafia and the Pope, the Meaning and the Metamorphosis of an Abortious Attempt," *AJSreview* vol. 7-8 (1982-1983), pp. 1-17 (Hebrew).

<sup>92</sup> See the passage from the anonymous *Sefer Ner 'Elohim*, Ms. Munchen 10, fols. 156b-157a, a book whose views are close to those of Abulafia's, that was translated in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 57 note 22. Compare also to Abulafia's *Mafieah ha-Ra'ayon*, ed. Gross, pp. 44-45, where he deconstructs the concept of a Jewish nation unified by the same beliefs. Unfortunately the manuscript is truncated in quite a sensible place, perhaps because of Abulafia's sharp critique.



superiority by the claim that it is related to intellectual processes and less to a choice of a specific nation solely on genetic grounds.

To summarize: The horizontal national messianism, as a popular and exoteric dimension, found in the historical interpretation of the parable, on the one hand, and the vertical, individual, esoteric redemption found in its context, on the other hand, represent diverging messages, each related to the parable of the pearl. Nevertheless, according to Abulafia, they may converge, when a person who believes that he has redeemed himself, takes over the responsibility or the mission to restructure religion and this is the case with the ecstatic Kabbalist who believed he was both the son and so I assume he considered himself also to be the possessor of the pearl<sup>93</sup> already in the present.<sup>94</sup> Strong mystical experiences, triggered by accelerated forms of bodily and mental activities, could convince him that he is of a different species than the human one<sup>95</sup> a fact that explains his radical attitude, as well as the negative reactions toward his views.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> It should be mentioned that in some Midrashic tales, the biblical Abraham was described as possessing a pearl, which was healing whoever was seeing it. See, e.g. *Babylonian Talmud, Babba' Batra'*, fol. 16b. See also the parable of the lost pearl in Maimonides's Introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*, and issue that requires a separate analysis.

<sup>94</sup> See the passage cited above beside note 38, and see also Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics*, p. 124.

<sup>95</sup> See the passage from his commentary on prophetic book, *Sefer ha-Melitz*, written in Messina in 1282, translated in Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 16. Let me emphasize that Abulafia's view of the human species, as consisting only by those individuals who actualizes their intellect, differs from modern understanding of humanism, which assumes the compound of body and soul altogether. See above note 46.

<sup>96</sup> The reactions toward his views are, on the basis of his own testimony in one of his rather early books written in 1273, *Sefer Ge'ulah* quite negative. See Idel, "Sefer Yetzirah and its Commentaries," p. 530. According to his own claim he was described as a heretic. This early testimony should be explained when a harmonistic picture of Abulafia as part of the more general, integrative approach is offered. Also later on, Abulafia was persecuted by the most important figure in the camp of Sefardi Rabbinic leadership, R. Shlomo ibn Adret. See my "The Rashba and Abraham Abulafia: The History of a Neglected Kabbalistic Polemic," in *Atara le-Haim: Studies in Talmudic and Rabbinic Literature in Honor of Professor Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky*, eds. D. BOYARIN et al., (Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 235-251 (Hebrew).